

FRIENDS, BEER MAKE IT EASY BEING GRUENE BY MOIRA MULDOON

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GRUENE -- "All that's missing is a tuba," Dan said, as he, Amy and I left Oma's Haus and started walking to Adobe Verde. We'd just eaten sausages and drunk beer in this burg near New Braunfels. A little oom-pah-pah -- and some lederhosen -- would have completed the scene.

The plan was to go to Hal Ketchum's reunion show at Gruene Hall. None of us had any idea who he was, but we wanted to see the town and go to Texas' oldest dance hall. Turns out we couldn't have found a better way to laze through a Saturday.

The family-owned-and-operated Oma's was our first stop, frankly, because it was the first sausage-and-beer place we saw. Drinking hefeweizen from cold glasses (a new cold glass appears with each beer), sprawling lazily beneath the arms of a big, low-branched tree and doing our best to ignore the laugh track from the "I Love Lucy" episodes being projected on an Oma's wall, we were a little hot and indolent for conversation. Cards, on the other hand . . . Four dollars'll get a pack from the Oma's gift store and delivery by the waitstaff. Cold beer, hot day, shade, some sausage on a stick, some sausage on a plate, me crushing my friends in a game of spades: I'm not sure it could have been any better, even with a tuba.

A policeman guided us across the road; Gruene is too small for traffic lights, so right in front of the dance hall a policeman directs traffic when things get hectic. We strolled past little shops and headed straight into Adobe Verde, the Mexican restaurant where people often go to drink margaritas post-tubing. We went to hatch plans -- and drink margaritas. And beer. And eat some quesadillas and fajita wraps. And play some more spades. And be really thankful when the waitstaff kept filling our water glasses even though the restaurant was getting busy and we were leaving mighty slowly.

We'd come to Gruene to hear the music, but we'd also come for a lark, for an adventure. And so we laid out some rules: Whoever could get Hal Ketchum to say one of the others' names while he was on stage got 10 points. Leading a conga line was worth 20 points. Getting to wear an item of clothing -- hat, boots, belt buckle -- belonging to someone else was worth some points, too. As was getting tossed out.

Pretty much none of that happened. Once we got inside the dance hall, we bought a few bottles of Lone Star and settled into one of the picnic tables outside. We talked and talked, the way you do over beers when the breeze is so soft as to be almost imperceptible, and watched the folks wandering round. The hatted, the booted, the bespectacled, the spectacles (there was a hen party), the kids, the old folks, the dressed up, the dressed down, the long-haired and the freshly pressed. And us.

And so it was the best of all the things I love about Texas: cold beer, an old dance hall, a mix of people, picnic tables, music, an almost imperceptible breeze and talking with good

friends who become even better friends by the night's end. The kind of day a Yankee or Midwesterner might use to explain why she's here, why she actually likes it here. The kind of day that insists you say out loud what you've been thinking for hours: This is a good life.

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